

# INTEGRATION IN A MULTIRACIAL SOCIETY: AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE \*

by:

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All praise is due to Allah, the Sustainer of all the worlds, and may there be His blessings and peace on all His messengers and on His last messenger, the Prophet Muhammad and his family, companions, followers, and all the believers until the end of time.

Honorable chairman, distinguished guests, fellow speakers, respected brothers and sisters, ladies & gentlemen.

To begin with , I wish to express my utmost congratulation to the organizer, Malacca Islamic Council (MAIM) having initiated this meeting of minds, and provided me the opportunity to share my thoughts. A seminar of this nature would not have been materialized without the support of all. It aims to understand the views and perceptions of Malaysian society towards the issue of multiracialism and national integration. It has been the purpose of the seminar as well to perceive how do they accommodate themselves living in a multireligious and multicultural community. We hope that the forum will generate continuous inter faith dialogue among pluralistic community in Malaysia:

Air jernih sajaknya landai

Jalan raya titian batu

Berunding cerdik dengan pandai

Faham dua menjadi satu

My dear brothers & sisters listeners,

Allow me to briefly talk about the concept of integration in a multiracial, multiethnic, multireligious society, the key term of our seminar:

1. Integration, n. [L. integratio: a renewing, restoring, cf. F. int[*e*]gration.]: the act or process of making whole or entire.
2. "The bringing of people of different racial, ethnic and religious groups into unrestricted and equal association, as in society, community or an organization; *syn*: desegregation." (The

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*American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language)*

3. "The act or process of integrating (incorporating as equals) into society or an organization of individuals of different races" (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary of Law*)

Malaysia has a Muslim majority and the Government is Muslim dominated. Although the Muslims have sufficient majority to rule the country on their own, they have chosen not to do so. Instead they deliberately chose to share with the non-Muslim minorities. In 1969 race riots broke out in Malaysia, resulting in some 200 people, mostly non-Muslims, being killed. An emergency was declared and the Muslim Malays took over the Government. The Western press declared that democracy was dead in Malaysia and wrote it off as another developing country destined for the wastebasket of history.

Yet today Malaysia, still under a Muslim dominated Government, is peaceful, stable and prosperous, growing at 8 percent per annum for almost 10 years. The Muslims of Malaysia are apparently not terrorists. Indeed, They have proven themselves capable of living and working with non-Muslims to create a united and progressive nation. There are no feuds in Malaysia; not between Muslims nor between non-Muslims. The official religion of Malaysia is Islam but Buddhist, Hindu, and Taoist temples and Christian churches are to be seen everywhere. Religious festivals of the different races and faiths are celebrated by everyone together. The non-Muslims in Malaysia do not regard Muslims as terrorists or Islam a violent creed.

Islam condemned excessive tribalism or fanaticism and the Prophet s.a.w preached against it, promoting unity instead. Chapter 3, Verse 103 the Quran says : "And hold fast all together by the Rope (religion) which Allah (stretches out for you) and be not divided among yourselves. And remember with gratitude Allah's favour on you, for you were enemies and He joined your hearts in love, so that by His Grace You became brethren."

The feuding between the Muslim sects and Muslim nations are obviously contrary to the teaching of Islam. Certainly the fanaticism and violence with which they oppose each other, reminiscent of the pre-Islamic and Jahiliah days of feuding, is not in keeping with Islamic teachings.



There is a misunderstanding among Muslims regarding the teachings of Islam on relations with non-Muslims. The Quran clearly stated that the Christians are the friends of the Muslims. Indeed, when the first few converts to Islam were persecuted by the Quraish idol worshippers, they were advised by the Prophet s.a.w to seek refuge in Christian Abyssinia. The Christian King of Abyssinia protected the Muslim refugees so well that attempts by the Quraish to extradite them failed.

All Jews are also regarded by Muslims as enemies because the Jews of Medina had been disloyal to the Government of the Prophet. Yet the Quran states that only those who take up against the Muslims are their enemies. In Chapter 2 Al-Baqarah Verse 190, the Quran states: "Fight in the cause of Allah, those who fight you, but do not transgress the limits, For Allah loveth not transgressors."

In Chapter 8 Al-Anfaal Verse 61, the Quran stresses: "But if the enemy inclines towards peace do thou (also) incline towards peace and trust In Allah, for he is the One That hearth and knoweth."

This means that the Zionists and their supporters who advocate violence against the Muslims must be regarded as enemies. But when they sue for peace they should get a positive response from the Muslims.

If Muslims frequently misunderstand certain teachings of Islam, the misunderstanding among non-Muslims, in particular Jews and Christians about Islam and Muslims today, is even worse. The clash between Muslims and Christians occurred quite early when Byzantium was still a Great Empire and stood in the way of the spread of the Islamic faith. But Christian Europe really worked up feelings against Islam during the time of the Crusades. The Crusaders whipped up anti-Muslim feelings to a frenzy. The perpetuity of this anti-Muslim feeling and the consequent violence against them can be described as a kind of feud.

And so the deliberate whipping up of anti-Muslims feeling has been going on for centuries. Nothing good that Muslims do, in particular in their relations with non-Muslims, is recognised. Thus the fact that Christians and Jews could practise their religions in Muslim Spain was hardly ever mentioned in European history books. The fact that the Christian reconquest of Spain led to the expulsion of the Muslims and the Jews, or forced conversion or execution has

never been condemned. That Jews actually preferred migrating to Muslims North Africa rather than stay in Christian Spain is regarded as of no significance.

No one, Muslims or non-Muslims, can deny that there have been a lot of terrorist acts perpetrated by Muslims . But then a lot of terrorism has also been perpetrated by non-Muslims. The difference is that if a Muslims does it, the deed is immediately attributed to his faith. When a non-Muslim commits the most heinous of terroristic crimes, his deed is not linked to his religion.

Fundamentalism is the most abused of words. It is equated with extremism. Yet if the teachings of Islam are studied, it would be clear that the best Muslims are the fundamentalists. The fundamentals of Islam are based on peace. Indeed, Islam means peace. The people who are usually described as fundamentalists are far from following the fundamentals of the Islamic religion. On the contrary, they are people who reject the teachings of Islam or who deviate from them. Most of them have seemingly reverted to the pre-Islamic "Jahilliah" ways of extreme loyalty to their groups, to fanaticism.

### **PM Talks About Key to Peace**

Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has called for dialogue among the various faiths and urged the people to set aside their religious differences to create a better world. "What we need more than ever today is a concerted effort to initiate inter-faith dialogue," he said as he made an impassioned plea for religious moderation at the opening of the World Council of Churches meeting in Kuala Lumpur, 3 August 2004.

The Prime Minister urged the 150 participants, who included world church leaders, to join him in calling upon people of all faiths to work together for peace and justice. "We cannot stand before a compassionate God while there is so much we have left undone because we are disunited," he said. This is the first time that the WCC had its meeting opened by a Muslim leader.



Abdullah, who is chairman of the Non-Aligned Movement and the Organisation of Islamic Conference, said to loud applause that as Malaysia's Prime Minister, he was not "a leader of Muslims but a Muslim leader of all Malaysians."

"I have a responsibility not just to my fellow Muslims, but also to Malaysians who profess other religions as well. It is my duty to ensure that their rights are protected, that they are free to practise their faith and that they are not pressured because they are not from the dominant majority.

"It is my duty to spread the message of tolerance among all, especially to the Muslim majority," he said. The strength of Malaysians was their diversity that united them. "if the world ever needed a lesson in diversity and making it work I am confident that Malaysia can be a showcase," he said.

The important virtue that the diversity brought out in Malaysians was moderation, which had always curbed extremism.

Promoting moderation is not easy and many practise their faith in absolutist terms without any compromise with others.

"This is why I believe it is important to call for moderation in our respective religions. If we fail to do so, we risk having our religion hijacked by those who promote hatred and violence," he said.

He said that the global scenario, including terrorism and the Iraq and Palestine issues, had led to less trust and goodwill between Muslims and Christians than before. Thus, there was a great need for a concerted effort to initiate inter-faith dialogues.

Abdullah said injustices in the global financial and trading system, threat to the environment, poverty, diseases, natural disaster, war and conflict were problems affecting everyone, regardless of their religion.

He said that solutions to the many problems humankind faced today were sometimes not forthcoming as "we refuse to build an international consensus that can generate the political will for change." This, he said, was where inter-faith dialogue came in as the different faiths all shared common values of peace, friendship and co-operation.

In stressing his point, Abdullah quoted a Quranic verse and a biblical passage, both which required the people to live in peace with one another. He said that with all the problems surrounding the people, religion must be a beacon of hope. "Religion must guide us towards conflict resolution, towards peace, towards a more just and equitable world order," he said.

## Root Cause of Social Dilemma

National unity is a major concern and racial integration has been well articulated in Vision 2020 as the country's number one challenge. Creating and sustaining national unity is a life-long process. It should start from the cradle, not at 17 years of age, hoping for a quick fix.





Our school system is to be blamed for the current racial polarisation. Divided by race from kindergarten, through primary and then secondary schools; deliberate efforts at integration to bridge the divide must be made through the creation of opportunities for our young people to interact.

The root cause of our social dilemma is the lack of a civil society where there is respect for law and order, and in which we treat others as we wish others would treat us. Three interrelated contributing forces in the formation of a civil society are upbringing, education and religion.

Proper nurturing in the home, holistic education at school and spiritual awakening help shape us to be good and responsible members of society. Any attempt to revitalise our society should seek answers in these root causes rather than apply knee-jerk responses to current social crimes.

In the process, our young people will also be developed to be leaders who will give priority to prevention rather than cure, focus on the continuing rather than the initial value of our scarce resources, and safeguard the dignity and rights of others.

### **Returning to Rukun Negara**

Come Aug 31, the Rukun Negara will be 34 years old and based on its history, the five principles should have been our way of life and not treated as only a pledge to be read occasionally. Proclaimed on Aug 31, 1970 by the fourth Yang di-Pertuan Agong, the Rukun Negara was formulated after the nation was rocked by the racial riots of May 13, 1969. It was aimed at uniting Malaysians who at that time still harboured a deep sense of racism. It was also to be used as a guide in the formation of one nation regardless of the different races and religions of the people.

The Rukun Negara consists of two parts. The first envisions the kind of society desired as stated in the following pledge: "Our nation, Malaysia, is dedicated to achieving a greater unity of all the people; to maintaining a democratic way of life; to creating a just society in which the wealth of the nation could be equitably shared; to ensuring a liberal approach to its rich and diverse cultural traditions; and to building a progressive society which uses science and modern technology."

The second part outlines the five principles: i. belief in God, ii. loyalty to King and country, iii. upholding the Constitution, iv. rule of law and, v. good behaviour and morality; embodying all the values needed to mould a society that is free from vengeance, envy and prejudice.

Recently, Malaysians were advised to "go back and appreciate the principles of the Rukun Negara in their everyday lives to strengthen nation-building." The call was made by Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie, one of the architects of the Rukun Negara. The principles, he said, "must be used as a benchmark in implementing various projects and jobs." Datuk Firdaus Ismail, agreed, saying: "Many Malaysians, especially the younger generation, don't appreciate the Rukun Negara. There are even those who cannot remember them. I once asked some primary school children and they told me they couldn't remember." Look also at our youngsters, the way they dress. They have more regard for foreign culture than their own. I worry that in the end, the Rukun Negara will no longer be regarded as something that is noble. Malaysians should take pride in the Rukun Negara as Indonesians do with their Panca Sila.

International Movement for a Just World president Dr Chandra Muzaffar said Malaysians need to look at the overall history of the Rukun Negara and its relation to the Federal Constitution and Vision 2020. Even though the Rukun Negara is still being recited at primary and secondary school assemblies but reciting without understanding its purpose and objectives will not have any meaning for the society. There is a need for a change in mindset involving all; leaders, religious groups, influential people and parents.

The president of the Sasana Abhiwurdhi Wardhana Society, Sarath W. Surendre, said based on what is happening today, including crimes which were alarming, Malaysians should go back to the Rukun Negara and adhere to the teachings of their religions. He hoped the Government would not concentrate only on instilling Islamic values among the Muslims. "The Government is actively explaining to the Muslims the concept of *Islam Hadhari*. I hope it would make the same effort in the application of values of other religions." Sarath, the treasurer of the Malaysian Consultative Council on Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism, said besides not appreciating the Rukun Negara, students also did not have a sense of belonging to their schools.



Council of Churches in Malaysia General Secretary Rev. Dr Hermen P. Shastri, said the council supported the principles of the Rukun Negara as the basis of governance of the country. "The first principle 'Belief in God' for example, signifies that all religions should co-exist peacefully and teach the people to respect each other and live in peace with one another."

Rukun Negara clubs will be set up in schools and in public and private institutions of higher learning in the country to promote and inculcate its guiding principles among students, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Dr Maximus Ongkili said.

The clubs will promote appreciation of the Rukun Negara through writing, speech contests, debates and drama performances; promote interaction, the spirit of tolerance and patriotism as well as co-operation among students of various races through extra-curricular activities such as motivational talks, campaigns, field trips and cultural exchange programmes. It is also to promote the caring spirit among students, to work together and participate in other support activities for the poor, the handicapped and the aged besides providing a forum for ideas, suggestions and input for national unity policies and programmes.

### **Islam Hadhari Has Changed Malaysians' Mindset**

Islam Hadhari is not something new as it has been around since the glorious era of Muslims. It focuses on current needs and civilization. The Government's effort to promote Islam Hadhari is showing progress in changing the mindset of Malaysians. Since its introduction in 2002, the progressive Islamic action plan of state management had been widely accepted by all Muslims and non Muslims. This could be seen not only in more Muslims attending government-held seminars but also their better understanding of the concept. The change in mindset could be seen in the way Muslims were able to improve work quality, be more ethical and disciplined and reject bad practices such as corruption. Malaysia could be a model of a developed, peaceful and outstanding country that portrays the true face of a Muslim society.

The Islam Hadhari concept has strengthened Muslims with the principles of inculcation of high moral values. It would help to change the people's mindset to achieve excellence and glory so

that they can compete internationally and become global players. For the concept to work, Muslims must work diligently and creatively, as well as uphold political stability, economic strength, educational excellence and other noble values. It is an effort by the Government to enhance the image of the people in the eyes of the world by strengthening their discipline and skills in science, technology and economy. Malaysians should strive to be known as inventors and not just users of inventions.

Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin Syed Putra Jamalullail said: "I am convinced that the international community's respect for us is due to our success as a progressive and dynamic Islamic state. I'm confident that the Islam Hadhari concept embraced by the Government will further enhance the image of Muslims in all aspects," he said. The King urged Malaysians to maintain national unity at all costs. "We have proved that although we come from diverse backgrounds, races, religions and cultures, we are able to live peacefully with mutual respect. I want Malaysians to maintain this unity as it is our source of strength."

### **Let's Strengthen Mutual Respect**

Mutual respect is the key to create a harmonious and stable environment among people of diverse racial, religious and cultural backgrounds. Mutual respect is an indispensable prerequisite for people to co-exist in a community or in a nation. It is impossible for moderation or tolerance to flourish or even flicker if there is an absence of mutual respect between the different races, practitioners of different cultures and believers of different faiths. For mutual respect to be strengthened in our nation, Malaysians of all faiths, of all ethnicity and of all cultures must first and foremost be willing to accept each other as they are. We must recognise and accept the existing diversity and realise that our diversity does not divide us. Rather it unites and brings us together.

I am not negating or disputing the need to create common grounds and shared values among us as part of nation-building but let us go about in a neutral way that will not put fear and create doubts in the hearts of fellow Malaysians. Therefore the five principles of the national pillar or Rukun Negara should be the basis for the creation of this common ground and shared values.



Muslims in Malaysia who constitute the majority have a heavy responsibility. It is their duty and responsibility to assuage fellow Malaysians of different faiths that we accept them as they are. This can be achieved if we adhere to the true Islamic teaching. The Muslim attitude towards their fellow mankind of different faiths should be as in a verse from the Quran: "Unto you your religion and unto me my religion."

Shaikh Muhammad al-Ghazali believes that Islam treats non-Muslims who are at peace with Muslims, as we treat Muslims, and that Islamic social system is based on the principle of participation and mutual cooperation. There is no harm for a Muslim to work under a non-Muslim and vice versa. Shaikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi stresses what he regards as the first principle in treating a non-Muslim in a Muslim land; namely, that except for a few exceptions, they have rights equal to those due to Muslims, and they have to fulfil obligations similar to those due from Muslims.

Shaikh Hasan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood Movement, held the view that Islam protects the rights and integrity of the religious minorities, and regards human and religious unities sacred principle because Islam forbids fanaticism, and makes the belief in all heavenly religions an inherent part of the Islamic creed. In practical life, Shaikh Hasan al-Banna maintained friendly personal relationship with Egyptian copts. He often declared that he aimed at making the entire population of Egypt "a religious minded people", each true to the teachings of his faith, be it Islam or Christianity.

The majority of Muslims in Malaysia are moderates because they hold dear to the fundamental tenets of Islam. Extremism is not an accepted norm among Malaysian Muslims. Therefore let us go forth in a coalition of Malaysians who have a deep and abiding love for their nation and the values it represents to strengthen further the feeling of mutual respect among all our fellow countrymen of diverse faiths, cultures and ethnicity, especially among the younger generation as in them is our future and our nation's future. Let us celebrate diversity in all its splendour and colour.

## **Conclusion**

All of us, of all religious adherences, no matter how our national loyalties might diverge or our ethnic roots might differ, can participate and cooperate in the exchange of goods, in the pursuit of education, and most important of all, in the promotion of peace. Peace is a pre-requisite for progress and a necessity for healthy life. Peace nurtures a climate conducive of creativity, inventiveness and excellence in all fields. Enmity and hostilities put a stop on progress and ruin the fruits of past achievement, and leads to unimaginable human miseries and sufferings.

No matter how different our religions, our national or our ethnic commitments might be, we are all equal human beings and brothers and sisters in humanity. We also need each other. No one religious group or a racial community or even a country can live by itself. Islam stresses universal human equality, and urges inter faith cooperation and sympathy towards non-Muslims. It forbids injustice even to the enemies of Islam. Needs of non-Muslim citizens are to be maintained by the Muslim state treasury. Yet, Islam does not condone humiliation to its adherents or the usurpation of their basic human rights, or wholesale expulsion from their ancestral land to make room for another race. Islam does not tolerate injustice or prejudices even against non-Muslims.

We see our destination, but our road map has yet to crystallize. We know what we want to be, but we are uncertain how to become. There can be no room for wishful thinking or complacency. If we are going to realize vision 2020, we must develop a sense of unity, we must work together for tomorrow to achieve it. It necessitates a more heightened level of commitment from all of us, anak malaysia – nation of malaysia. It calls for sacrifices and courage, most importantly, we need to think differently.

What important is the right way that accommodates and tolerates our commonality in our shared destiny. The racial harmony and social networking are important to ensure the national integrity and identity. We would like the multi races and religions in Malaysia to stay united in diversity. I wish each and every one of us perseverance and continuous struggle for a better tomorrow and we can be proud of ourselves.

Gunung Daik terserlah berjajaran

Tampak dari segala pekan



Apa yang baik ambillah pengajaran  
Buruk jauhi segera buangkan

Thank You, *Wa billahit tawfiq wal hidayah, wassalamu 'alaikum wrm wbr.*